

Transcript of MNB(E) Commanding General, Brig Gen. Daniel Keefe, Press Conference  
Held 24 FEB 03 at Camp Bondsteel, Kosovo

Q. We have information that the number of NATO soldiers will be reduced and that Kosovo is quite safe. This is a very encouraging statement. I want your statement.

A. I have heard comparisons that violence here is less than in other places of the world. But, I think we should all remember that this is a fragile society that we are building here and any act of violence, no matter how small, has to be addressed. In the four months that I've been here, I've seen the KPS improve. And it is clearly one of our most important fledgling institutions. So, yes, there is good news in the level of crime across Kosovo. But make no mistake there are still bad people out there; criminals and cowards that want to take Kosovo back to times of hatred and violence. And my soldiers and I are committed to providing a safe and secure environment against them, hand in hand with UNMIK and the KPS.

Q. You have already heard about the statement by a Serbian politician called Zorn Dzhahhijlj(?) who declared to a British agency that he is going to create a mini-state in the northern part of Kosovo. Do you think such declarations disrupt the development of Kosovo?

A. First, I am not going to answer your question directly because it is a political issue and certainly the great thing about democracies is that all politicians can voice their own opinions. The fact of the matter is Kosovo is under the protection of the UN. IAW UnSCR 1244, the future status of Kosovo will be decided by the UN. So I'll not add my opinions to the discussion. I tell the soldiers in my Brigade to every day represent the very best in your nations. And so for my American soldiers I tell them to represent the best of America and when you leave here leave it a better place than when you came.

Q. We've heard that you're going to dismantle Camp Magrath. Do you think you're going to need that camp?

A. We've already dismantled four of our minor camps. What we've come to find is that when Kosovo becomes more secure and more stable we do not need all those soldiers in those camps. More important what I've found is that as we close these camps we have more soldiers available to patrol the streets and countryside. The fact of the matter is that you look at Camp Bondsteel here and you can see how much additional space we have for soldiers here. So to summarize we don't need the camps because of the environment and we can more effectively use our soldiers by not guarding so many small camps.

Q. In your opening statement, and I am going to quote ad verbatim, "The fact is that we have no evidence that this is the case, not one report of armed extremists operating in Kosovo has been substantiated, not one." Just to remind you, aren't those extremists the ones who committed murder in Srenica (sp?) who activated a hand grenade in Mogila and (inaudible)? Two days ago an armed attack occurred in Mogila, whereupon 30 rounds and Mr. Nokitsch was heavily wounded and he was transported to hospital. There was a store in which there were ten Serbs. Is it really possible that you do not have those reports and isn't this an act of armed extremists?

A. First, with respect to those reports you mentioned, I have all those reports. What I am referring to in my opening statement are these rumors that there are large numbers, in other words groups of 10, 15, 20 armed extremists moving around Kosovo. That's what I am talking about. So what you're talking about I refer to the second paragraph of my opening statement. There are clearly people who want to bring violence and hatred back into our communities. Those are acts of cowards and criminals. Everyone has to reject them, both Kosovo-Albanians and Kosovo-Serbs and all the people of Kosovo. I think we are in agreement. There are criminal acts in Kosovo. Even the smallest act, because our society is fragile, we have to pay attention to them.

Q. Could you explain to us that 300 additional soldiers in the north part of the sector mean the situation has deteriorated? And what are the results of the weapons confiscation you mentioned in the opening statement. And finding the perpetrators of the acts we just talked about. Due to the fact that a massive attack occurred in Klokot, and the perpetrators have still not been found.

A. With respect to the 300 soldiers, they came to the eastern part of the our sector as part of a planned exercise, not because of any deterioration. I made a decision to put them over on the ABL just because it seemed like a good area to operate. And that's why I can say with confidence that we don't see any activity of extremists on the ABL. The second part of question about people being held responsible for criminal acts. And here's an example in Sernica where a man was murdered. That man was caught is standing trial. The incident mentioned in Mogila. That individual was caught and is under the control of the KPS. And then you mention the Klokot bombing from last summer. Every other week I personally meet with representatives of Civpol and the KPS and we're not giving up on it.

Q. Two issues: How much do your operations get hampered by rumors of extremists groups operating in the area? And the second question, do you believe the same assessment you gave with the border of Serbia would be correct with Macedonia as well?

A. First, our operations are not hampered by rumors. I encourage people to report. Every report we get, we aggressively send soldiers and patrols to investigate. With respect to the border with FYROM, we have a tremendous working relationship with border brigade, from both sides of the border to discuss areas and compare sectors. We do the same at battalion and brigade levels. I am confident we have a good understanding of what goes on at the border and there are not large groups of extremists in the area.

Q. You already visited Kaminica. Meanwhile, there was an explosion in a house in Kaminica. The Serbian family members reported to the mayor of the city that this was not an ethnic act. Shortly after your visit there was a confiscation of weapons. How do you assess the situation in Kaminica? Because the situation on the other side of the border is not very quiet.

A. Well, I would just go back to what I said earlier. The incident in Kaminica was clearly an act by a criminal or coward who does not move forward. Just last month we had a go-and-see visit for returnees and the president welcomed those people back. And the atmosphere around that

visit was very positive so my outlook for Kaminica is very positive but everyone has to reject these criminal acts because we are in a fragile society.

Q. We heard the rumors of the arrest of extremists groups in Kosvo. Which groups are those? In those meetings you have KFOR and Yugoslav officials, it is said that those forces have their base in our sector. What do you base your information on? Do you get it from Serbia as well?

A. When I talk about rumors, I talk about what I hear in the media. And the fact of the matter is we do not see any evidence of extremists groups.

Q. A week ago we heard that the Serbsan forces were threatening KPS and TMK as well. And they are demanding so they can mobilize, threatening them that they are going to liquidate them. How do you address those threats?

A. I am not aware of these and I won't react to rumors or threats, but we will continue to use our soldiers in coordination with Civpol and the KPS to continue to provide a safe and secure environment. I take threats seriously, but there are lots of rumors out there.

Q. Kosovo institutions are upset because there is no democratic progress; of course this is done not because of institutions. What is your relationship with TMK?

A. TMK 6, the KPC, is a civil emergency response organization. That is there only purpose. By KFOR directive, the soldiers of MNBE assist the TMK in becoming a better civil emergency response organization.

Q. We have information that the American soldiers in Germany have taken precautionary measures. Do the troops here in Kosovo have the same risk alert because of the global threat of terrorism.

R. Force protection is always a commander's concern. I continually review and make assessments of our force protection posture. I would not discuss our operation procedures but we have taken full measure s to protect our soldiers.

Q: Last week you visited Ferizaj; you were talking about different events. One of the segments was the IDP return. Do you think the safety is good so the IDPs can return.

A. Yes, I think it is. We have had a number of go-and-see visits where Serbs have gone back to their homes in Ferizaj. Last year we had 700 returns come back to the Gjilan region and I

have positive signs that we'll have more success in 2003. I think it is just another important step as we continue along this road to a better society in Kosovo.

Q. In your sector, some arrests were made last week. When we're talking about the arrests, Feb 11. How do you assess the safety in your sector?

A. Overall, our sector is safe and secure and it is calm. Everyday hundreds of thousands of people in this region go about their daily lives. People of different ethnicities freely move about. But at the same there are isolated incidents of violence that none of us should tolerate.

Q: When you met the president of Ferizaj, did you have a chance to talk about some Chinese business offerings and what was the conversation about?

A. Business investment and business growth is outside my area of responsibility. And I'd leave it to the municipality's president to make any comments.

Q. As you know political problems are connected with economic problems as well. Do you think there could be a real Chinese investment in your sector? Meantime when an NGO is against this can be (inaudible). The relationship has deteriorated between Bondsteel and Ferizaj. What is your comment?

A. There is no deterioration between Bondsteel and Ferizaj. I do not know enough about the investments you are referring to even comment on them. But it seems to me that any investment in Kosovo would be a positive investment, as long as it was legal.

Thank you for attending today and your role in this society in putting out the truth and telling the real story is real important. So, thank you.